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ABSTRACT

Psychological stress has been identified as a main variable related to adjustment in college and to college attrition. Five of Chickering's seven areas of development for college students have been related directly to sexuality. Although a major concern of college students is the anxiety associated with sexual issues, little research has been published concerning the impact of college life on sexual anxiety. Undergraduate men (N=40) and women (N=40) completed a form of the Concept Specific Anxiety Scale containing eight referrant concepts to represent sexual situations that commonly elicit anxiety among college students. Results indicated that although females reported higher anxiety levels than males, none of the differences were significant. Women tended to report more anxiety than men in seven of the eight situations, with the exception that men tended to be more homophobic. The effects of age appeared to be more powerful than class rank in relation to sexual anxiety, suggesting that the decreases in sexual anxiety were attributed more to life experiences than to the college environment. (NRB)

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SEXUALITY AND STUDENT DEVELOPMENT: SEXUAL ANXIETY AS IT RELATES TO CHICKERING'S VECTORS

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Sexuality and Student Development: Sexual Anxiety As It Relates to Chickering's Vectors

Psychological stress has been found to be one of the main variables related to adjustment in college and to college attrition (Bloom, 1974). It is often assumed that academic pressure is the main cause of stress for college students, but Cope and Hannah (1975) found a greater psychological stress associated with the social aspects of the campus environment. Some of the major concerns they documented were a lack of satisfaction in relationships with the opposite sex, disillusionment about friendships, and differing moral standards among students.

Chickering (1972) has outlined important developmental tasks associated with adolescence and early adulthood. The sexual feelings associated with these tasks appear to be an important component of growth and development. As Chickering has noted, the developmental period of young adulthood is a time when a strong potential for change exists and patterns are established that last long into adulthood. An individual's identity has been shown to directly affect their sexual behaviors (Mercer & Kohn, 1979).

A major issue for college students is dealing with anxiety related to sexual issues. Since sexual behavior develops in the context of interpersonal relationships, strong normative pressure to conform often results in anxiety as a student strives to form his or her own identity. Anxiety is known to affect personality development; therefore, it seems important to assess changes that occur in feelings of sexual anxiety during the college years.

Chickering has identified seven major areas of development for college

students, five of which relate directly to sexuality: establishing identity, freeing interpersonal relationships, developing integrity, managing emotions, and achieving competence (Chickering, 1972). A primary objective of institutions of higher learning is to foster development in these areas. Sexual researchers have shown repeatedly that Human Sexuality courses and sexuality programs can change attitudes and decrease feelings of sexual anxiety (Dearth & Cassell, 1976; Fyfe, 1979; Buckner, 1981). However, little research has been published concerning the environmental impact of college life in general on sexual anxiety. It appears that anxiety should decrease as a result of the length of time a student is involved in college life. The purpose of this study was to investigate whether sexual anxiety decreases as a result of age or length of time in college and to determine if there were differences in sexual anxiety between males and females.

Method

Procedure

This study was conducted in a large public university in the West. Eighty respondents were randomly selected from two undergraduate residence halls for inclusion in the study. All 80 subjects volunteered to participate in the study. The sample of 40 males and 40 females ranged in age from 18 to 30 with a mean age of 20.6, and were fairly equally distributed by class, with a kurtosis of 4.0 and a skewness of 1.5. Given Yankelovich's (1974) extended survey of contemporary college and non-college youth and his finding of comparability across different regions and groups, it appeared that a different sampling technique was not called for due to a concern for generalizability. Subjects were informed that their results would be kept confidential and that

they could discontinue taking the questionnaire at any time.

The relative anxiety associated with specific sexual situations was measured by the Concept Specific Anxiety Scale (CAS) (Cole & Oetting, 1968). The CAS measures the amount of anxiety elicited by a concept which is illustrated by a specific situation. For each specific concept, a standard set of nine semantic differential items relating to subjective and behavioral signs of anxiety is presented. The CAS manual reports high reliability and validity for the instrument. Internal consistency reliabilities are generally in the .90s and test-retest reliabilities with varying samples and time periods are reported to be .70 or better. Research cited in Oetting and Cole's (1980) manual indicated high construct validity for the scale.

A form of the CAS was developed with eight referrant concepts representing sexual situations that commonly elicit anxiety among college students. Three random orders of the eight CAS items were used to equalize the effects of order of presentation. Each referrant concept began with the stem, "How I feel when I think about . . . ."

Partial Correlation Coefficients were used to remove the effects of age from class rank, which was used as the measure of length of time in college. This measure was used to determine if class rank and the level of sexual anxiety related to the sexual situations had an important relationship. Partial Correlation Coefficients were also computed to remove the effects of class rank from age to clarify if the age of students is a more important factor in decreasing sexual anxiety than exposure to college life. Multiple t-tests were used to determine if there were significant differences in sexual anxiety between males and females.

Results

Pearson Correlation Coefficients for age as related to sexual anxiety indicated a negative correlation at or below the .05 level of significance for four of the eight sexual situations investigated. There were no significant Pearson Correlation Coefficients for class rank and sexual anxiety at the .05 level. Partial Correlation Coefficients indicated that when one controls for the effects of class rank, increasing age is negatively correlated with anxiety at or below the .05 level of significance in four of the eight situations. This indicates that as the age of a college student increases, his or her sexual anxiety decreases for these situations. When the effects of class rank were controlled for age, only one sexual situation was significant at the .05 level, and was positively correlated with sexual anxiety. Table 1 shows Pearson Correlation Coefficients and Partial Correlation Coefficients for age and class rank with CAS items. Multiple t-tests for independent means indicated there were no significant differences in anxiety levels for males and females.

Insert Table 1 about here

Discussion

Although there were generally higher anxiety levels reported for females than males in the sexual situations studied, none of the differences were significant at the .05 probability level. In a summary of the research on the psychology of sex differences, Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) state that one of the areas in which there is suggestive, but ambiguous evidence of sex differences is the research that suggests women are more likely or willing to report

fear, timidity, or anxious behavior. The women in this study tended to report more anxiety than males in seven of the eight situations, with the exception that the males tended to be more homophobic.

For the sexual situations investigated, it appears that the effects of age are much more powerful than class rank in relation to sexual anxiety. Four of the eight Partial Correlations for age and sexual anxiety, when controlled for class rank, were significant. The significant stems were: ". . . having characteristics generally attributed to the opposite sex", ". . . expressing my feelings to someone I just met", ". . . talking with my partner about having sex with him/her", and ". . . being nude".

Apparently, as students increase in age the anxiety surrounding their sexual identity tends to decrease. When a student first comes to college, he or she is likely to have a stereotype of feminine or masculine roles which he or she has incorporated. As a student continues to mature physically and develops more intimate relationships, he or she begins to develop and become more comfortable with his or her own identity. In an extensive review of the research surrounding traditional sex roles, Feldman and Newcomb (1969) noted that male and female seniors tended to have less conventional attitudes and interests than their respective groups of freshmen. In their review, Feldman and Newcomb did not attempt to differentiate between the effects of age and class rank. The results of this study suggest that age is a more powerful factor in the establishment of sexual identity.

Similarly, the significant correlation between age and sexual anxiety, for the item ". . . expressing my feelings to someone I just met", when controlled for class, indicates that older students experience less anxiety

in expressing their feelings in interpersonal situations. As the student grows and develops, he or she normally becomes more tolerant of other's values and opinions and is able to share more of his or her own values and feelings (Murphy, 1960).

Chickering (1972) relates the general trend toward greater ease in interpersonal relationships to changes that occur during the college years. These results suggest that this development is a function of age rather than the amount of exposure to college life.

Another aspect of freeing interpersonal relationships is developing intimacy. Erikson (1968) considers the developmental task of establishing intimacy versus isolation to be the most important one of young adulthood. Chickering (1972) also emphasizes the shift in intimacy that occurs in the college years. As well as physical intimacy, openness and acceptance are considered by him to grow during this period. During late adolescence and early adulthood, it generally becomes more accepted for individuals to be sexual with thei partners. As would be expected, students experienced less anxiety when ". . . talking with their partner about having sex with him/her " as they grew older. It appears that the important factor in this developmental task is age rather than class rank.

Traditionally, students learn from parents and the culture in general to repress sexual feelings and emotions. In early adolescence, these beliefs usually are not challenged. But, as students acquire increased freedom from their home and community, they begin to question these beliefs and change their behaviors (Sanford, 1962). As students learn they can control and express these sexual feelings appropriately, they become more comfortable with their

sexuality. In this investigation, age was negatively correlated with sexual anxiety for the situation described by the item "How I feel when I think about being nude". The only significant partial correlation between class rank and sexual anxiety, when controlled for age, was for this item. The positive correlation with class rank indicated an increase in sexual anxiety with increased class standing. It appears that while a student progresses through the experiences of college life, he or she becomes more sensitive to being nude. Since a negative partial correlation was found between sexual anxiety and age for this situation, it is not clear what factors influence this difference in sexual anxiety.

Chickering (1972) and other developmental theorists would predict that as a student progresses through the experiences of college life, that anxiety would decrease in a variety of sexual situations. This does occur; however, it appears that the experiences of life rather than the length of exposure to the college environment are more powerful factors in the decrease of sexual anxiety reported in this study. The results of this investigation raise questions about the impact of college on sexual anxiety.

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TABLE 1

Correlations of Age and Class Rank with CAS Items

Item Stems "How I feel when I think about. . ."	Pearson Correlations		Partial Correlations	
	Age and Sexual Anxiety	Class and Sexual Anxiety	Age and Sexual Anxiety[a]	Class and Sexual Anxiety[b]
". . . talking to someone with very different views on sexuality"	.18	.15	.11	.07
". . . having characteristics generally attributed to the opposite sex"	-.31*	-.17	-.27*	.02
". . . expressing my feelings to someone I just met"	-.19*	-.06	-.20*	.07
". . . talking with my partner about having sex with him/her"	-.22*	-.12	-.19*	.01
". . . talking about sexual values with a homosexual"	-.15	-.04	-.15	.06
". . . having sexual fantasies"	-.14	-.13	-.08	-.07
". . . being nude"	-.12	.11	-.23*	.22*
". . . going to an expert with a sexual concern	-.23*	-.15	-.17	-.03

[a]Controlled for Class

[b]Controlled for Age

*=p<.05